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ABSTRACT

This digest introduces a specialized approach to teaching at-risk students a foreign language. In the dyslexia literature, the approach is referred to as "multisensory structured language." Because the methodology places a strong emphasis on the metacognitive aspects of language in both native and foreign language instruction, the term "multisensory, structured, metacognitive language instruction" (MSML) is used to address at risk students' weaknesses in recognizing linguistic rules and structure patterns, which are necessary tools for becoming independent users of a foreign language. The approach involves the students in learning to access their linguistic knowledge and the instructor in facilitating metacognitive thought processes. MSML instruction is multisensory, structured, explicit, cumulative, metacognitive, highly repetitive, phonetic, alphabetic, and analytic/synthetical. Each 45- to 60-minute lesson focuses on one of the following rule systems: phonology/orthography, grammar, or vocabulary/morphology. These lessons are discussed in detail, and sample exercises are provided. (Author/JL)

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TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO AT-RISK STUDENTS

ERIC DIGEST

BY ELKE SCHNEIDER

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Digest

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Teaching Foreign Languages to At-Risk Learners

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The number of students classified with learning disabilities who attend colleges and universities has increased over the past 10 years (Vogel & Adelman, 1993). The 2-year foreign language requirement, a policy at many U.S. colleges and universities, can be a major stumbling block for students with learning disabilities. Self-reports indicate that, despite histories of struggle, many of these students want to learn a foreign language (Javorsky, Sparks, & Ganschow, 1992). Two other groups of at-risk foreign language learners are those whose learning disabilities are not identified until they are in college, and those who remain unclassified because they do not report their difficulties to college learning assistance providers.

Researchers and practitioners in high school and higher education settings have become increasingly aware of the difficulties students with language learning disabilities encounter as they learn a foreign language. A handful of high schools have demonstrated success in foreign language instruction with alternative approaches that are commonly used to teach native reading and writing skills to students with learning disabilities. (For a review of the literature, see Ganschow, Sparks, & Schneider, 1995). For over 40 years, findings have demonstrated that students with language difficulties profit from a highly structured, multisensory, direct, and explicit approach that helps them to see and understand how language is structured and provides ample opportunities for practice in a language-controlled environment (see McIntyre & Pickering, 1995).

This Digest introduces a specialized approach to teaching at-risk students a foreign language based on experiences teaching German. In the dyslexia literature, the methodology is referred to as *multisensory structured language* (MSL) (McIntyre & Pickering, 1995). Because the methodology places a strong emphasis on the metacognitive aspects of language in both native and foreign language instruction--for example, helping students understand how language is structured--the author uses the term *multisensory, structured, metacognitive language instruction* (MSML) to address at-risk students' weaknesses in recognizing linguistic rules and structure patterns, which are necessary tools to become independent users of a foreign language. MSML involves the students in learning to access their linguistic knowledge and the instructor in facilitating metacognitive thought processes.

The MSML Training Program

MSML instruction is adapted from the MSL Orton/Gillingham principles for teaching students with difficulties reading, writing, and spelling in their native language (Gillingham & Stillman, 1969). Given the emphasis on explicit teaching of rules, the approach runs contrary to the current trend of implicit rule instruction in foreign languages (Krashen, 1981). The theoretical foundation for the approach is based on the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis, which proposes that foreign language learning difficulties stem in part from native language difficulties (Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlman, 1989).

MSML instruction is multisensory, structured, explicit, cumulative, metacognitive, highly repetitive, phonetic, alphabetic, and analytic/synthetical. Each 45- to 60-minute lesson focuses on one of the following three rule systems: phonology/orthography, grammar, or vocabulary/morphology.

Phonology/Orthography Training

In the phonology/orthography training, drill cards with phonograms (a single letter or letter combination for a single sound or sound combination) are used and practiced in a six-part lesson. (1) In the *visual drill*, students see a card and provide all the sounds they know for it. (2) In the *auditory drill*, students hear a sound or sound combination and write down the spellings. (3) In the *blending drill*, students read single syllabic nonsense or real words by providing the sound for each and then blending the sounds into a word. (4) In the *spelling exercise*, students practice newly learned sound/symbols in short nonsense and meaningful words, phrases, and sentences. (5) In the *reading exercise*, students read short words, phrases, and sentences that emphasize a new phonogram. (6) In the *final rule summary*, students summarize the newly learned rule(s) orally and in written form (structured summary sheet) to reinforce metalinguistic processing skills.

Figure 1: Phonogram Drill Card

front of card	*back of card*
ä	The umlauted vowel is long (like A in BAD) when followed by no more than one consonant. The umlauted vowel is short (like A in AT) when followed by more than one consonant **Position** Initial: der Äther (ether) Middle: die Gäste (guests) Final: not applicable unless followed by silent-h: Mäh'! (mow!)

Grammar Training

After achieving basic knowledge of German sound/symbols, students learn inflectional rules, sentence structure patterns, and tenses. Here, students go through five phases: (1) In the *rule presentation/discovery phase*, the instructor introduces students to the new topic in a step-by-step discovery learning process. Following working-step instructions provided on a rule poster, students move differently shaped and colored cards around that represent different parts of speech and grammatical functions. The poster remains visible throughout the instructional period. (2) In the *color-card phase*, students repeat these working steps with colored-shaped cards (moving cards) until they have memorized the new concept.

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To reinforce the metalinguistic processing skills, students are consistently encouraged to provide reasons for why they chose a certain solution (providing rules). (3) In the *white card phase*, students practice the rule further without the benefit of color but with continuous kinesthetic reinforcement and metalinguistic processing. Figure 2 shows an example of these two card phases.

Figure 2: Colored or White Card Phase

INSTRUCTIONS: Form correct sentences in the simple past and present perfect and explain why you did what you did.

SUBJECT (yellow)	VERB COMPONENTS (pink)		DIRECT OBJECT (blue)
DIE GÄSTE	GEKAUFT	SPIELTEN	DREI HUNDE
PETER	GEFÜTTERT	HAT	TENNIS

ANSWER KEY:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT	VERB
1) Die Gäste	spielten	Tennis.	
2) Peter	hat	drei Hunde	gefüttert.

(4) In the exercise sheet phase (see Figure 3), students use their knowledge without the benefit of color or kinesthetic reinforcement but continue to practice metalinguistic processing skills in different gap-filling exercises by verbalizing their decisions.

Figure 3: Sample Exercise Sheet

Name: _____ Date: _____

WORK SHEET: FINITE VERBS IN PRESENT TENSE

Fill in the appropriate verb ending. Füge die passende Verbendung ein.

1. Silvia tanz___gerne.
2. Sie trink___gerne Kaffee.
3. Fred und Maria trink___auch gerne Kaffee.
4. Sie geh___oft ins Cafe "Wien".
5. Komm___du mit ins Cafe, Franz?", frag___Silvia.
6. Nein, ich fahr___heute nach Hause.
7. Franz frag___: "Geh___ihr am Sonntag ins Cafe?"
8. Silvia antwort___: "Nein, leider nicht. Wir hab___am Montag eine Englischprüfung.
9. Franz sag___: "Na dann, viel Spaß heute!"

5) In the final rule summary, students write and explain in their own words the rule patterns learned in the lesson including mnemonic devices, thus reinforcing the metalinguistic awareness process. Figure 4 presents an example of a rule summary sheet.

Figure 4: Sample Rule Summary Sheet

Name: _____
Date: _____

Grammar Rule _____

Topic: _____

General Rule: _____

Details/Examples: _____

Keywords/Other information to remember: _____

Vocabulary/Morphology Training

Vocabulary/morphology training focuses on raising students' awareness of semantic units, or morphemes (e.g., compound nouns, affixes), in words and gender distribution rules (e.g., all nouns ending in *-heit* or *-keit* take the feminine article *die*). It begins with a basic vocabulary training phase in which students develop their own vocabulary cards with pictures and color-coding of gender and nouns. After students have a vocabulary of about 100 words, a more detailed vocabulary/morphology training begins. Recognition and memorization of semantic units of words (e.g., affixes, patterns such as noun + noun, adjective + noun) are learned by going through the same five grammar training phases of rule presentation/ discovery, colored and white card practice, sheet exercises, and rule summary. To develop efficient vocabulary decoding and encoding skills, the student builds morphological grids of either word families (e.g., *bilden*) or vocabulary with identical word patterns (e.g., adjective + suffix *heit* = noun). Figure 5 shows a sample morphological grid. Students use these vocabulary items also in short sentence/paragraphs of dictations and in their own small writing projects.

Figure 5: Sample Morphological Vocabulary Organizer of the Word *bilden* (to form, build)

Prefix	ROOT	Suffix	WORD	Translation
AUS	BILD	EN	ausbilden (verb)	educate
AUS	BILD	UNG	Ausbildung (noun)	education
EIN	BILD	UNG	Einbildung (noun)	imagination

This training allows students to categorize vocabulary into systematic chunks, thereby enhancing reading, writing, spelling, speaking, and listening skills.

In conclusion, students who demonstrate difficulties learning to read, write, and spell in their native language are likely to experience similar difficulties in a foreign language. An MSML approach to instruction may provide the additional support struggling students need for success in the foreign language classroom.

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